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Fiftieth session

REPORT OF THE FIFTEENTH MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE (28 June - 1 July 1999)

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The meeting was opened by the Chairman of the Executive Committee, His Excellency, Ambassador Victor Rodriguez Cedeño (Venezuela), who welcomed the delegation of Mozambique as a newly elected Member of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme. He then informed the Standing Committee that delegations of Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Iraq, Malaysia and Kyrgyzstan had requested to participate in meetings of the Standing Committee during 1999 as Observers, and suggested that their participation begin immediately, in line with the Executive Committee's decision on Observer participation taken in 1998 (A/AC.96/911). Delegations agreed to this proposal. Agenda items 4(i)(c) through 4(iii) were chaired by His Excellency, Ambassador Raimundo Pérez-Hernández y Torra (Spain), Vice-Chairman of the Executive Committee.

II. ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA AND THE REPORT OF THE FOURTEENTH MEETING

2. The agenda (EC/49/SC/CRP.11) was adopted without revision. The *Draft Report of the Fourteenth Meeting* of the Standing Committee (EC/49/SC/CRP.10) was adopted with one correction to paragraph 64, replacing the word "activity" with "captivity" in line four.

III. ASSISTANT HIGH COMMISSIONER'S STATEMENT

3. In his opening statement, the Assistant High Commissioner updated the Standing Committee on recent developments in UNHCR's operations around the world. They included many new challenges, notably in Kosovo (on which there would be discussions in the course of the meeting) and in parts of Africa. Some encouraging progress had been achieved in Latin America and Europe (also on the meeting's agenda) and in some countries in Asia, but in global terms the Office faced many urgent and outstanding needs. Referring to internal developments in the management of UNHCR, he stated that the new structure announced at the fourteenth meeting was now in place and that a new management structure for Africa had just been endorsed by the Senior Management Committee. He drew attention in conclusion to a worrying

projected shortfall of funds for 1999, appealing to the Standing Committee for its continued support.

IV. INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION

4. The Director of International Protection's opening statement focused on the quality of asylum today and on the need to find an appropriate accommodation between state interests and state responsibilities.

5. The *Note on International Protection* (EC/49/SC/CRP.12) was introduced by the Chief of the Standards and Legal Advice Section of the Department of International Protection. The quality of the Note and of the other two documents submitted to this Session of the Standing Committee was widely commended by delegations who found them, generally speaking, informative, to the point, and useful particularly for the purposes of drafting of the conclusions.

A. Note on International Protection

6. A large number of delegations, across the spectrum of Executive Committee membership, participated in the discussions, ensuring a varied and rich exchange of views. The theme of the Note, which was the need for reconciling State interests with internationally assumed responsibilities, evoked particular interest amongst speakers, with all accepting that without a responsible balance between national interests and international responsibilities, refugee protection is in serious jeopardy.

7. The Kosovo drama was an important element in the statements of many delegations. There was a call for a lessons-learned analysis to be undertaken by UNHCR that should include the Humanitarian Evacuation Programme. A number of delegations expressed appreciation for the protection guidelines produced by the Office to facilitate an operational response to important protection problems. Amongst the other points made, it was pointed out that the Kosovo situation had very much captured the public mind in many parts of the world, which was in one sense an opportunity to be capitalized upon to sensitize public opinion to refugee problems and make it more receptive to protection-based responses. The element of burden-sharing in the response to the Kosovo crisis was also one picked up by a number of delegations as an illustration of the capacity of the international community to combine its resources and its efforts towards early solutions. It was highlighted that problems are not so intractable where the will is there to address an issue together in a comprehensive and principled way.

8. It was also pointed out by many delegations that, while Kosovo was very much in the media, there were other very serious protection situations around the world which demanded equally focused and cooperative responses. It was stressed that international efforts to assist refugees and seek solutions to their plight should be equitable and based on human need, regardless of the nationality, race, geographic, political or military importance of the refugee population.

9. Delegations expressed in various ways their concern about the fact that, while asylum is still being made available to the majority of refugees, there was a slow yet noticeable decline in the conditions under which asylum is being offered -- that is, as the Director pointed out in her introductory remarks, in the quality of asylum. This was in fact a main theme binding the documents together at this year's Standing Committee. One delegation noted its concern about refugees becoming victims, through restrictive interpretations and practices, of the very system set up to protect them.

10. The main issues selected by delegations for comment included the need for a law and rights-based approach to refugee protection, as well as the

ongoing significance of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol today as dynamic instruments for refugee protection and the need for further accessions to them, as well as to the statelessness instruments. Delegations commented variously on matters related to temporary and complementary protection, burden-sharing, the use being made of new or developing protection concepts. One delegation endorsed the view that refugee protection is primarily the responsibility of States and is best achieved through effective cooperation among States and UNHCR, adding that bilateral cooperation between concerned States, within the framework of internationally agreed protection principles, should also be welcomed. The problems posed by the arrival of undocumented asylum-seekers were also mentioned. Several delegations expressed particular concern about how to protect the asylum system against abuse by persons who are not generally in need of protection, and even by criminal elements. There was a strong focus in many statements on the problems of women and children, with delegations commending the attention given in the Note to UNHCR's activities to address such problems as sexual violence against women and separations of children. The non-governmental organization (NGO) Observer delegation also welcomed UNHCR's initiatives in this regard and encouraged the Office to further increase the attention paid to these problems, in particular concerning the implementation of guidelines and policies in the field. Several delegations welcomed the establishment of child rights-based performance objectives and called for mainstreaming protection and gender issues into programming and budgets. Another theme of interest to many delegations was the protection of civilians in armed conflicts, especially child soldiers.

11. A number of delegations reported welcome developments including new refugee legislation and consideration being given to accessions to the refugee and statelessness instruments. With respect to the search for solutions, a number of delegations emphasized the distinct nature of the three solutions (voluntary repatriation, resettlement and integration) and reiterated that voluntary repatriation remains the preferred solution in the majority of refugee situations.

12. There was strong support for UNHCR's efforts to strengthen its partnerships on protection, through the Reach Out process and related activities. UNHCR was encouraged to broaden the base of its coalitions for protection. Delegations received with interest the overview of recommendations made during the series of seminars conducted by UNHCR on "Challenges to the Institution of Asylum and Refugee Protection -- Reconciling State Interests with International Asylum Obligations". Several delegations sought further information about the outcome of the seminars.

13. Interest was expressed in there being a heightened focus on protection issues during the fiftieth session of the Executive Committee, and the recommendation was made in this regard that delegations consider making major protection statements during that session.

B. Detention of Asylum-Seekers and Refugees: The Framework, The Problem and Recommended Practice

14. The Chief of UNHCR's Standards and Legal Advice Section introduced document EC/49/SC/CRP.13. Delegations acknowledged the importance of the subject of detention of asylum-seekers and refugees and expressed appreciation for UNHCR's recently revised Guidelines. A number of speakers reiterated that the starting point should always be the position already agreed upon by the Executive Committee that the detention of asylum-seekers is in principle undesirable and should be avoided. It was observed in this context that detention should only be resorted to when there is a compelling need and where there is no alternative, and even then, for limited periods.

Appreciation was expressed for the stress placed in the paper on the need to avoid arbitrary detention and to ensure that conditions of detention conform with international human rights standards. Other points made by the delegations included the fact that asylum-seekers arrive irregularly should not, by itself, be a reason for keeping them in detention; that monitoring mechanisms in relation to the detention of asylum-seekers, including the implementation of the Guidelines, and exploring alternatives to detention are important; that detention should not result in the splitting of families; and that detained asylum-seekers should have access to legal advice. One intervention sought to clarify that the paper did not refer to the detention of asylum-seekers whose applications had been properly rejected.

C. Family Protection Issues

15. The document EC/49/SC/CRP.14, was also introduced by the Chief of UNHCR's Standards and Legal Advice Section. There was general recognition that family protection issues are key to the protection of refugees generally, and that the protection of the refugee family is best promoted within a rights-based framework. One delegation emphasised the relevance to this debate of human rights instruments, particularly the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Many speakers affirmed that measures to maintain the unity of the family should be complemented by a generous approach to family reunification when family members are separated. There was a general sense that definitions of the family should be flexible and pragmatic enough to take into account elements of dependence, and to recognise that the head of the family may not always be male or adult. The need for training and sensitization of officials on this issue was stressed. One delegation drew attention to the complex emotive bonds which imbue family relations, and cautioned against viewing family ties as being based on economic dependence alone. Some delegations called for special attention to the place of elderly within the family, and the need to address family protection issues in the context of registration procedures and systems of relief distribution. Support for the paper's position that refugee children should not be adopted during emergencies was expressed. One delegation called for greater clarity on the distinctions being made between family unity and family reunification.

D. The Conclusions Process

16. It was noted that the documents prepared by UNHCR and the discussions held were very valuable for efforts at the national level to develop positive policies, practices and legislation. Some delegations took the view that the concluding sections of CRP 13 and CRP 14 provided a good basis for Executive Committee Conclusions. Others felt that they were useful for further development into Conclusions, but found the language to be too detailed and prescriptive. It was generally felt that all three conference room papers contain the core elements around which consensus could be developed.

V. PROGRAMME AND FUNDING

17. Under this agenda item, the Standing Committee gave consideration to an update on UNHCR's programme and funding situation; a strategic oral presentation on the Americas, former Yugoslavia and Europe; a Global Report on UNHCR's activities in 1998; and a draft decision on UNHCR's operational reserve under the proposed new budget structure.

A. Overall programme and funding projections

18. The review of the programme and funding projections (EC/49/SC/CRP.16) was introduced by the newly appointed Director of the Division of Operational Support and by the Head of the Donor Relations and Resource Mobilization Service. The Director drew attention to the discussion of recent programme

developments (paras. 11-37) in the document before the Committee; this was in response to the wish expressed by the Standing Committee in its deliberations in 1998 on the nature of the budgetary documentation that it wished to consider.

19. She then summarized the results for 1998, under both General and Special Programmes and highlighted how funding restraints had required the reduction of expenditure to meet assessed needs. She also drew attention to the assessed needs for 1999 as set out in Annex 1 to the conference room paper. These figures will need to be reviewed in the light of available resources.

20. The Head of the Donor Relations and Resource Mobilization Service provided delegations with a review of the carry-over of funds from 1998 and updated information on the status of UNHCR's Global Appeal for 1999, including an examination of the impact of the Kosovo crisis on funding requirements for the year. He encouraged delegations to make available predictable and timely contributions to the Office, which would allow for coherent programming throughout the year.

21. In their statements under this item, delegations raised a number of specific questions on programmes. The critical link between funding and programming was recognized. In the light of the likely need to reduce budgets because of funding restraints through a process of prioritization, one delegation asked that Member States be informed of such proposed cuts before they are made. Several delegations drew attention to the low carry-overs and the difficulties this posed for the funding of programmes at the beginning of a year. One delegation suggested that predictable multi-year pledges by donors, namely negotiated pledges, could help in this regard. The need to expand UNHCR's donor base was underlined, as well as the untapped potential for fund raising in the private sector.

22. In response, details were provided by the Director of the Division of Operational Support on funds made available to specific programmes and the sources of these funds. She also confirmed that prior information would be given to donors should it be found necessary to make cuts in any assistance programmes in the course of the year for lack of funding. The Head of the Donor Relation and Resource Mobilization Service thanked the Committee for their various suggestions on ensuring broader and more predictable funding of UNHCR's programmes, recalling that further information consultations were planned to take place in the course of the autumn. He noted that the agenda for these consultations was now somewhat broader than initially foreseen. He also confirmed that a strategy on private sector funding, using past experience, would be formulated before the end of the year.

B. Americas

23. The Director of the Americas Bureau presented the Standing Committee with an oral strategic report on UNHCR activities in the region. He focused his remarks on UNHCR's objectives in the region, which were being adjusted to the general trend towards greater peace and democratization in the region, and a reduction in the number of refugee-producing situations. These objectives comprise strengthening the protection framework in the region, consolidating durable solutions, promoting public awareness and constituency building.

24. Several delegations referred to the recent incidents of cross-border movement between Colombia and Venezuela, highlighting the need for close cooperation between both Governments to address this problem. The Governments of Colombia and Venezuela were also encouraged to work closely with UNHCR in order to ensure that both the right to seek asylum and the principle of voluntary return are respected. The importance of UNHCR's role

in such situations was stressed, and an invitation was extended to UNHCR to conduct a mission to the region. Delegations were informed of the recent establishment of a bilateral mechanism to respond to the needs of persons implicated in such movements which would, *inter alia*, include cooperation with international humanitarian organizations. An NGO Observer delegation commented that UNHCR should be allowed access to persons concerned, and urged that the displaced persons must be assured the right to seek asylum.

25. The role of UNHCR in Colombia, both in responding to the problem of forced displacement in the country and in upholding the right to seek asylum, was recognized by delegations. UNHCR was encouraged to continue its cooperation with other international organizations, particularly International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), in it's operational plan for Colombia. One delegation commended UNHCR for developing its programme in Colombia around "Deng's principles". It was suggested that a regional approach and coordinating strategy could be developed by all parties involved.

26. The conclusion of the Guatemalan repatriation and reintegration programme was welcomed by delegations and described as an example of successful "migration cooperation" between two States, with the support of UNHCR. The importance of including uprooted persons as part of a peace process was recalled. Progress in integrating refugees in Mexico was also welcomed. Delegations expressed interest in participating in the proposed "lessons learned" exercise on the Guatemalan repatriation and reintegration programme. UNHCR was commended, furthermore, for its successful efforts to mainstream gender issues into its work in the region.

27. Delegations voiced support for UNHCR's regional strategy for protection. The need to strengthen the asylum framework was acknowledged, but one delegation mentioned that preventive measures should not be overlooked given the instability which continues to prevail in parts of the region. The recent decision to open a UNHCR Office in Quito was welcomed in this context. Delegations also welcomed the close partnership between UNHCR and civil society in southern South America, as well as the resettlement programmes recently initiated. Appreciation for UNHCR's strengthening of international protection networks in the Caribbean was reiterated.

28. The Director for the Americas welcomed the interest of delegations in participating in the planned evaluation and lessons-learned exercise on UNHCR's Guatemalan repatriation and reintegration programme. With regard to UNHCR's operational plan for Colombia, he recalled that the principles of complementarity and a common approach with other United Nations agencies were key underlying assumptions of the programme. In addition, he drew attention to UNHCR's facilitating role at the request of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Resident Coordinator) and chairing of thematic working groups on internally displaced persons in Colombia. The Director also confirmed UNHCR's willingness to facilitate dialogue with concerned governments on cross-border movements, and welcomed the proposed mission to the region, which he indicated he would be undertaking as soon as possible. The Director underlined that UNHCR shares many of the concerns expressed on the need to uphold asylum principles, but at the same time recognizes the complexity of the situation on the Colombian/Venezuelan border. Through dialogue and goodwill, ways could be found to reconcile protection principles with legitimate concerns of states. Lastly, the Director reiterated the importance UNHCR gave to the accession campaign and efforts to enhance support for the protection strategy adopted for the region.

C. Former Yugoslavia

29. The acting Coordinator for the Bureau for South Eastern Europe Operations delivered an oral strategic report on the situation in south-eastern Europe, reviewing developments in the region, particularly with regard to the Kosovo emergency. He outlined UNHCR's objectives as lead agency in the region and plans for the coming months, highlighting the challenges posed by the massive, spontaneous movement of refugees and displaced persons back to Kosovo. The facilitation of return and consequent repositioning of resources was being carefully balanced against the needs of persons of concern who choose to remain behind in neighbouring countries and provinces. The acting Coordinator informed delegations that a meeting with Governments on the future of the Humanitarian Evacuation Programme would be convened on 12 July 1999.

30. Delegations acknowledged that there had been criticism in the early stages of the emergency when UNHCR and the international community in general had been overtaken by the scale of the emergency. However, this had given way to an exemplary response, demonstrating a spirit of burden-sharing and international solidarity. It was suggested that it may serve as a model for future international response to crises, in particular the quotas that were offered by countries towards the Humanitarian Evacuation Programme. Delegations stressed, however, that the granting of asylum should not be contingent on offers of third country assistance. It was recognized that the proliferation of so many international actors and the variety of state interests during the early stages of the Kosovo crisis had complicated coordination efforts. Many delegations gave details of the support provided by their Governments to meet the many pressing financial and other needs during the height of the emergency. Delegations agreed that the daunting challenges that the swift and massive return presented to the international community would necessitate improved cooperation and coordination within the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and between United Nations agencies, NGOs and local partners.

31. The heightened involvement of the military in humanitarian operations was the subject of concern by several delegations, while appreciation was expressed for NATO's timely intervention in assisting the early humanitarian response to the crisis. In this regard, it was emphasized that the delivery of humanitarian assistance activities in Kosovo should remain independent and non-political.

32. It was stressed that attention generated by the Kosovo emergency should not detract from other crises around the world. In the same vein, delegations stated that contributions for Kosovo-related activities should not be to the detriment of programmes elsewhere. UNHCR was encouraged to pay careful attention to balancing its efforts to streamline and downsize, with the financial resources and contingency planning needed to respond effectively to such emergencies. It was suggested that future discussions could take place on this issue. One delegation cautioned UNHCR on the pitfalls of over-extending its capacity and the need to define its involvement, based on mandated responsibilities. The discussion also reflected gratitude for the efficient work of NGOs in the field.

33. Agreement was expressed on the importance of an independent lessons-learned exercise that had been announced by the Assistant High Commissioner and some suggestions were made as to its scope. Delegations also looked forward with interest to the meeting on 12 July 1999, convened by UNHCR, at which the organized return of refugees from third countries would be discussed.

34. Many delegations encouraged humanitarian agencies to address the continuum between relief and reconstruction at an early stage. Utilization of local capacities in this regard was emphasized. A number of delegations voiced appreciation for the continued efforts to register refugees and returnees. One delegation, however, indicated disappointment that registration had begun slowly. Delegations welcomed initiatives by UNHCR and other United Nations agencies on demining and mine awareness issues.

35. The need to establish protection mechanisms to safeguard the interests of minority groups and ensure that equal attention is paid to all ethnic populations in Kosovo was highlighted. Delegations emphasized the need to continue winterization efforts both in neighbouring counties and in Kosovo. Delegations also expressed the need to continue to give priority to the needs of women, children and victims of sexual violence, as well as elderly. Concern was expressed, moreover, that residual refugee caseloads in neighbouring countries should not be forgotten.

36. Responding, the Director of the Division of Communication and Information expressed appreciation for the support widely voiced by the Standing Committee. Careful note had been taken of the concerns expressed on specific aspects of this exceptional and challenging operation, and of the suggestions that had been made as to those that should be included in the evaluation about to start. He also suggested that the issue of UNHCR's emergency capacity, with limited staffing resources, might be the subject of informal consultations. In answer to some of the enquiries made by delegations concerning the distribution of responsibilities between the various agencies, the acting Coordinator for the Bureau for South Eastern Europe Operations referred to the coordination unit set up by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Pristina. Another major challenge was that to respond rapidly to reconstruction needs, which was under the responsibility of the European Union.

D. Europe

37. The Director of the Bureau for Europe presented the strategic objectives of the Bureau, which included the promotion of a coherent and principled approach to asylum policies and practices in Western Europe; assistance to the Central and Eastern European States in establishing and strengthening functioning asylum systems; consolidating the institutional framework and implementation mechanisms and practices in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States; the promotion of measures to reduce statelessness; and the promotion of comprehensive and durable solutions for displacement problems in the Caucasus. He then reviewed developments in Western Europe and the European Union harmonization process, specifying the nature of UNHCR's involvement. Work to strengthen asylum systems in Central Europe and the Baltic States was closely tied to the accession process of those States to the European Union, while cooperation with the PHARE programme of the European Union was now well established. The Director noted that in Eastern Europe, there was both progress and problems in the field of asylum, and with regard to statelessness. The CIS Conference Steering Group had decided to form a Working Group to look at some form of continuation of the process beyond the year 2000 which would consolidate the work completed, and help to address outstanding problems. He concluded by outlining efforts by the Bureau to ensure the inclusion of the special concerns of refugee women and children in planning and programming at the country level.

38. Interventions mainly focused on the CIS Conference and the meeting of the Steering Group held one week earlier. Delegations voiced their agreement with the conclusions of that meeting that some form of continuation of the process was needed, and looked forward to a pragmatic approach to the work of the Working Group, and continued engagement by UNHCR in the implementation of

the Programme of Action. One delegation expressed particular encouragement with UNHCR's efforts to involve and hand over activities to development agencies in the region. Approval was expressed with the UNHCR's strategic objectives in Europe and there was acknowledgement of the challenges facing States in dealing with mixed population movements. Support, in particular, was given to the continued dialogue and contribution of UNHCR to the European Union's work, notably preparations for the forthcoming summit in Finland in October, as well as the European Union's High Level Working Group on Migration and Asylum. Several delegations expressed interest in learning more about UNHCR's work in Central Europe and in the conflict resolution processes in Georgia.

39. Responding, the Director of the Bureau for Europe reiterated UNHCR's commitment to the CIS Conference process, which, remained very important in terms of consolidating the progress made. He noted there was a lot of work still to be done. The Director elaborated further on UNHCR's role in Georgia and Central Europe, and confirmed that UNHCR would seek to replicate in other areas of the Caucasus such inter-agency initiatives as had been undertaken in Azerbaijan.

E. Global Report

40. In a brief statement introducing the Global Report on Activities in 1998, the Director of the Division of Communication and Information recalled the discussions that had taken place on standardizing reporting on programmes, which had resulted in a more rational sequence comprising a Global Appeal, Mid-year Progress Report and Global Report of Activities. Despite the volume of the Global Report now before the Committee, it in fact represented a net reduction since it now combined a series of reports previously issued separately. He regretted that limited staff resources in a period of considerable constraints had led to some delays, which explained the late issue of the Global Report and some imperfections in its content.

41. Several delegations expressed their support for the new standardized approach, welcoming the Global Report as the first attempt to implement the decision taken by the Committee at its fourteenth meeting (EC/49/SC/CRP.10, para. 57). It was felt that the new approach would give increased transparency and allow a better focus on impact and lessons learned. One delegation drew attention, however, to the specific reporting requirements of his Government on the use of earmarked funds. More time was needed to confirm that the new format would meet these requirements.

42. In conclusion, it was agreed that the Secretariat would arrange for further informal discussion of the Global Report in due course, once delegations had had the opportunity to review its contents in greater depth.

F. Budget structure

43. The Director of the Division of Resource Management recalled that the proposed new budget structure had been shared with the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ) as suggested at the Standing Committee's fourteenth meeting. The report of the ACABQ was contained in document A/AC.96/900/Add.4, while conference room paper EC/49/SC/CRP.17 provided a summary of issues raised by the ACABQ, together with a draft decision for consideration by the Standing Committee.

44. The Chairman commended the transparency of UNHCR's dialogue with the ACABQ, noting that the latter had endorsed the proposed new budget structure, subject to possible further recommendations in the context of the budget proposals for the year 2000. Several delegations expressed their support for the proposed changes, and for the third option listed by ACABQ concerning the

Operational Reserve, namely that its level should be constituted at ten per cent of the proposed programmed activities in the Annual Programme Budget being submitted for approval.

45. Though pleased with the progress made on the unified budget structure, one delegation noted that further improvements could be made, particularly as regards linking objectives and resources required to meet them, and the impact on activities if there is a reduction in the resources required. Another delegation, while supporting the proposed mode of calculating the Operational Reserve cautioned that the amount should remain within a manageable ceiling. Should this not be the case, further examination would be required. This delegation likewise supported the ACABQ's observation on the issue of tied funding.

46. The Director of the Division of Resource Management acknowledged these various concerns and confirmed that the work on the new budget structure is still in process, and that it is an incremental process to be implemented over the next two years, supported by new computer systems currently under development.

47. At the invitation of the Chair, the draft decision was then adopted (see Annex).

VI. COORDINATION

48. The Head of Secretariat and Inter-Organization Service (SIOS) provided delegations with an update on work undertaken by coordinating bodies within the United Nations system since her report at the Standing Committee's fourteenth meeting, as well as information on plans for the humanitarian segment of the substantive session of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to be held in July 1999. Mr. Ross Mountain, Assistant Emergency Relief Coordinator, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, provided further information on coordination within the United Nations, in particular updating delegations on discussions within the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and the Executive Committee on Humanitarian Affairs (ECHA) since February 1999 and developments with regard to the humanitarian segment of ECOSOC.

49. In statements under this agenda item, delegations expressed satisfaction with the formulation of the humanitarian segment of ECOSOC. One delegation requested to be informed of UNHCR's expectations for the humanitarian segment of ECOSOC.

50. Delegations were informed that the paper prepared by UNHCR on the Brookings process will be made available during the humanitarian segment of ECOSOC. The Head of SIOS indicated that considerable discussion had been undertaken on the issue of the gap between relief activities and longer-term development, and that there was a need for action to be undertaken on this issue. The Assistant Emergency Relief Coordinator also informed delegations that the issue of the protection of civilians, as well as humanitarian workers, in conflict situations was a concern which had been gaining attention in Security Council debates.

VII. GOVERNANCE

51. The Standing Committee gave final consideration to the annual theme for the fiftieth session of the Executive Committee, basing its discussion on a draft decision circulated in the room. One delegation proposed to delete the words "including those on related issues by other humanitarian agencies" at the end of the second operative paragraph of the draft text, and this was agreed. Subject to this amendment, the text was approved and appears in

annex, which thus contains the following annual theme for the fiftieth session of the Executive Committee: "Strengthening partnership to ensure protection, also in relation to security".

52. One delegation expressed a preference for the theme topic to have ended after the word "protection" to ensure the clarity of the theme and as a more elegant wording. This concern was echoed by others who hoped that negotiations in the future on the choice of annual theme topics could place a high emphasis on clarity.

VIII. MANAGEMENT, FINANCE, OVERSIGHT AND HUMAN RESOURCES

A. Audit follow-up

53. The Director of the Division of Resource Management introduced the item by drawing the attention of the Standing Committee to the document entitled *Audit Follow-up: Financial Management and Programme Management* (EC/49/SC/CRP.18) and to the *Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ) to the General Assembly at its Fifty-third session* (A/AC.96/901/Add.2). He explained that the former paper came at the end of the audit cycle, and provided the Standing Committee with further information on follow-up to the 1997 audit report. The full response to the auditors had already been provided to the Standing Committee as A/AC.96/901/Add.1. The Director went on to note an improvement in the receipt of audit certificates since the audit report, pointing out that the overall percentage had increased to 68.7 per cent, comprising government partners (56.3 per cent), international NGOs (82.6 per cent) and national NGOs (52.3 per cent).

54. One delegation expressed concern that there still appeared to be delays in the receipt of reports (sub-project monitoring reports and audit certificates) from implementing partners, and enquired as to impact of newly-established NGO database and other measures. The delegation expressed satisfaction that the issue of income recognition had been carefully studied and looked forward to further consultations on this issue, as required. Concern was expressed at the cut back in activities for refugee children and the apparently low priority given to this issue. Another delegation sought clarification regarding cooperation between UNHCR and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) on environmental issues.

55. In his response, the Director of the Division of Resource Management noted that UNHCR had means other than audit certificates for the oversight of activities of implementing partners, and that no additional funds were released until UNHCR was assured of the proper use of the previous instalment. On the issue of cooperation with UNEP, the Deputy Director of the Division of Operational Support gave examples of shared environmental assessments in Nepal, the United Republic of Tanzania and Kenya. UNEP is also active on the Steering Committee of an important UNHCR project which identified best environmental management practices in refugee-hosting areas. The Deputy Director informed delegations that UNHCR was attempting to mainstream activities for children into general activities, thus ensuring their funding under the annual programme as core activities rather than through Trust Funds.

B. Update on change management

56. Introducing an *Update on the Change Management Process* (EC/49/SC/CRP.19), the Deputy Director of the Division of Operational

Support, drew attention to a number of specific aspects of the work underway, both under the new Operations Management System (OMS) framework, and the Integrated Systems Project (ISP), designed to provide the necessary information technology support.

57. Further explanations were requested notably with respect to the estimated time needed to complete all the change initiatives, the level of impact which had been achieved in the area of programming and protection as a result of the introduction of the first set of changes, and the link between strategic planning and evaluation. Some clarifications were also sought as to the new approach to the postings and promotions of internationally recruited staff and to their contractual status. Some concern was expressed at the possible impact of the change process on the work and morale of the staff.

58. In response, the Deputy Director informed delegations that it was recognized that the change project is taking time to complete and implement, mentioning that this is linked to the complexity of the environment in which UNHCR operates, as well as the wide scope of the change initiatives. He explained that specific steps, such as the purchase and installation of software, or the elaboration of guidelines and manuals, are easier to put in place than changes in established processes and in the culture of the organization. Further, delegations were informed that the changes in the programming instructions issued earlier in 1999 relate to the submission of plans by field offices for the year 2000, and it will therefore only be possible to measure a real impact as these plans are implemented. With regard to the link between strategic planning and evaluation, it was noted that the main focus in the new planning framework is on the setting of objectives, performance indicators and related outputs. The Deputy Director hoped that these changes will make it easier to evaluate progress and overall impact. Regular self-evaluation exercises will also form part of the new framework. Meanwhile, he reiterated that it is important that there should be a sustained commitment to the change management process.

59. On the new human resources management policies, the Director of the Division of Resource Management specified that the proposed changes in the postings and promotions process had been approved by the Joint Advisory Committee, reviewed and endorsed by the Senior Management Committee and was expected to be signed by the High Commissioner within days. He explained that while the new contract is classified as an "indefinite contract", it should be understood as a contract which is not timebound, but which is subject to UNHCR's operational needs, the performance of the staff member, and the level of financial resources available to cover staff costs, thereby allowing UNHCR to maintain flexibility to contract and expand according to its operational needs. On the question of the effects of so many changes on UNHCR's staff morale, it was acknowledged that the organization had not been very successful in communicating a clear vision to the staff of the scope of the change process and that this, together with downsizing of operations and other developments, had caused some unnecessary anxiety and frustration among UNHCR staff. He informed delegations that an evaluation of various change initiatives undertaken by the organization was under consideration as part of the Evaluation Unit's coming workplan. This could shed light on their impact on staff.

IX. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

60. There being no further business, the Chairman closed the meeting.

DECISIONS ADOPTED BY THE STANDING COMMITTEE AT ITS FIFTEENTH MEETING

I. DECISION ON THE STRUCTURE OF THE ANNUAL PROGRAMME BUDGET

The Standing Committee,

Noting the Report of the ACABQ on UNHCR's proposed budget structure (A/AC.96/900/Add.4),

(a) *Requests* UNHCR to proceed with the preparation of the Annual Programme Budget for the year 2000 according to the prototype submitted;

(b) *Decides* to adopt a single Operational Reserve constituted at ten per cent of the proposed programmed activities in the Annual Programme Budget being submitted for approval.

II. DECISION ON THE ANNUAL THEME OF THE FIFTIETH SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

The Standing Committee,

Recalling the decision taken at the forty-sixth session of the Executive Committee that the General Debate will be discontinued and replaced by a debate on a focused annual theme to be selected in consultation with the High Commissioner and the Standing Committee at a meeting held at least three months before the annual plenary session (A/AC.96/860, para. 32(h)),

Recalling that, based on a decision by the Standing Committee of the Executive Committee at its twelfth meeting, the annual theme debated at the forty-ninth session of the Executive Committee was "International Solidarity and Burden-Sharing in all its Aspects: National, Regional and International Responsibilities for Refugees";

(a) *Decides that* the annual theme to be discussed at the fiftieth session of the Executive Committee will be "Strengthening partnership to ensure protection, also in relation to security";

(b) *Considers that* the debate on the annual theme should be conducted, *inter alia*, on the basis of relevant work undertaken at the inter-sessional meetings of the Standing Committee, including in respect of international protection, as well as of previous conclusions of the Executive Committee and other relevant documents or studies;

(c) *Requests* the High Commissioner to submit to the plenary session appropriate background documentation to provide a broad framework for the debate.